

Convocation 2015
Sarah Lawrence College

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If convocation is for the whole college, and it is, why, should it seem right to speak primarily to the students? Why should students be the defining feature of an educational institution? The Greek word for education is *paideia*, deriving from the word *pais*, child. Then there is *paidia*—differing by only a letter and an accent from *paideia* and meaning first childishness, and then play (its opposite, earnestness). You can see how they might all be connected etymologically, and, as is so often the case, etymology provides a playful occasion for thought (and for groans, if my own children’s reactions are typical). This etymology suggests a kinship, by way of childhood, between education (or, I would say, philosophy) and play, a kinship especially important for us, who tend to confuse serious thought with terminal earnestness. It is the perennial temptation of a shallow moralism to pride itself on its intellectual depth.

At the end of his dialogue, *Symposium*, long after all the speeches on erotic love have been given, Plato paints a scene for us. After a night of carousing in talk and in drink, everyone has fallen asleep—that is everyone but Socrates, Agathon (the tragic poet) and Aristophanes (the comic poet), who are engaged in a conversation in which Socrates is unrelentingly driving them to the conclusion that “he who is by art a tragic poet is also a comic poet” (223d). But Aristophanes and Agathon can’t keep up and fall asleep, at which point, Socrates leaves to go to the gym, and then, despite the all-nighter that thoroughly exhausted all the others, he spends the rest of the day, we are told, in his usual manner. Whatever else we are to make of it, the togetherness of comedy and tragedy seems to have something to do with this understated Socratic triumph and endurance. In any case, elsewhere in his own name, Plato speaks approvingly of play and earnestness as a pair of sisters (*Letter 6*, 323d). So what might this

kinship between tragedy and comedy, play and earnestness, mean, and what does it have to do with education? Or, speaking for my children, why am I nattering on about this?

Plato's *Phaedo*, as the account of the death of Socrates, is surely the most earnest of his dialogues. With his followers gathered round him, Socrates drinks the hemlock, fulfilling the death sentence meted out by Athens for corrupting the young and not believing in the gods of the city. The *Phaedo* is also the dialogue where Socrates argues at length for the separate existence and immortality of the human soul and teaches a kind of asceticism lest we corrupt the soul while it is temporarily housed in our bodies. Socrates is especially expansive about the corrupting power of erotic love, saying that all men, and especially philosophers, ought to avoid intercourse with the body, which, he says, "fills us up with loves, desires, and fears and every sort of image and nonsense so that truly, as the saying goes, in reality, when subject to it, it is not even possible for us ever to think" (66c). Socrates, now seventy years old, warns that one should not give into these urges unless it is absolutely necessary. So, serious stuff, and yet . . . several pages before all of this, we are told, that Xanthippe, Socrates' wife, comes to see him in prison "holding his little child" (60a). Now, how old can this little held-child be? Two? Three at the most? So, contrary to the advice he seems to offer others, Socrates hasn't spent his old age celibate and earnestly avoiding sex, even sex with his notoriously shrewish wife. This is funny, and in being funny, meant to undermine the surface moralism—the earnestness—of the dialogue, and with it any certainty it might seem to offer that the soul is deathless, separate, and apart from the body. So, while it may be true that passion interferes with clear thinking (we all have experience of this), nevertheless, without passion it is not so clear that thinking is even possible. Thought needs a motive. But, in the *Phaedo*, to get the point, you have to get the joke. You have to be charmed by Socrates so as to see that there is a puzzle here, a problem—to see that Plato

does not present everything as already having been resolved. So, to mirror Platonic openness, a reader must resist the temptation to close the book on Socrates—whether by earnestly praising him for moral courage or by earnestly condemning him for moral hypocrisy.

Openness by way of humor, of play, is a feature of all genuine philosophy. It is why Socrates describes the entrance of the beautiful young Charmides in the dialogue bearing his name as leading to laughter and a shoving match among his group of potential lovers who are seated side by side on a bench in a wrestling school. Each wants to make room for Charmides next to himself, but none of them will stand up. This is where it gets especially funny, for Socrates hints, but would never simply say in this dialogue the subject of which is the virtue moderation, that their reluctance to stand has to do with the physical effect their eros for Charmides produces in these young men.

In the dialogue *Theaetetus* the question is “What is knowledge?” Plato has the young Theaetetus initially say that knowledge is perception—what we take in directly and without mediation from the world. And how does Theaetetus claim to have acquired this knowledge? From his senses? No, from a book. This is a wonderfully sly revelation of the necessarily mediated and indirect character of any praise of immediacy, something showing up in another way in Plato’s *Philebus*. This dialogue begins with Socrates’ summary of an argument he is in the midst of with Philebus over what the human good is—wisdom or pleasure (you can guess which side Socrates is on). Soon, Philebus’s young companion, Protarchus, takes over the argument, and after only a few pages, again not directly but by way of hints, we discover that Philebus has fallen asleep. And why not? Why on earth would someone who cares only about pleasure and not about truth have any stake at all in the outcome of an argument—even an

argument about pleasure? Without much thinking about it, Philebus pursues what he likes—particular pleasures, not pleasure with a capital P.

Now, just so you don't wonder whether my by now obvious love of Plato is skewing this issue, there is also the first sentence of Descartes's *Discourse on Method*. It goes like this:

Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world, for each thinks he is so well provided with it that even those who are the most difficult to satisfy in every other thing, are not at all accustomed to desire more of it than they have.

So Descartes seems to claim that good sense or reason is distributed equally among human beings. This seems reasonable; he is, after all the founder of modern rationalism. Yet, as he goes on to say that there are people much cleverer than he, his own example suggests the sentence is not true. Still, Descartes seduces us into accepting the equality of reason by appealing to something that is, in truth, equally distributed—our natural desire to think well of ourselves, our egoism, our selfishness, which, in distorting our thinking, is precisely why a book with the full title *Discourse on Method For Rightly Conducting Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* is necessary in the first place. So Descartes knows that, like Plato's character Theaetetus, we would make a lot more progress in our thought were we to admit how pretentious we are. Ironically, we take ourselves most genuinely seriously by learning to laugh at ourselves, for laughter is the affect of knowledge of ignorance. And without admitting that we do not know (really and not merely "for the sake of argument"), it is impossible to ask a serious question. Humor, our ancient tool for gaining some distance on ourselves, enables us to wonder whether what we take seriously is really so serious. To use a Platonic image, if we are sealed in a cave of orthodoxy (or, to use our version, if we are all inevitably creatures of our time and place), while tragedy may show us that the principles of our lives, in being profoundly at odds, condemn us to despair (first it tells us we live in a cave of mere appearances; then it seals the entrance and tells us we

can't escape), comedy, is not so confident. In making us laugh at what we think we know, it encourages us to ask whether we really know. Because comedy remains uncommitted about whether there is something more than the cave, rather than terrifying us, its contradictions amuse us and beckon us to wonder.

The connection between *paideia* and *paidia* then? Openness. Not the kind where you have a view and are committed to it, but condescend to allow that others too have their views to which they are, in turn, committed. Being complacent with contradiction doesn't encourage thought—it encourages, well . . . complacency. It isn't very interesting, and it isn't good for your souls. No, I mean an openness that sufficiently detaches you from yourself to give you the freedom to wonder whether you might be wrong—an openness that liberates you as a liberal education should, for you can't really think a question through without seriously considering all of its sides, which, of course, does not mean going off in all directions at once and indiscriminately endorsing all sides.

I want to end with a puzzle. What we do at Sarah Lawrence might be described this way: A whole bunch of old people talk for hours and hours with a whole bunch of young people. Why do they do it—especially the old people? We've been around a lot longer than you, have seen a lot more, and, frankly, most of us don't really believe that whatever progress exists in the world means that you are more enlightened than we are. So why? I won't speak for my colleagues, but for me it has to do with your potential for openness. You have arrived at a strange and interesting age, a time in your life when you are at once able to raise the most serious questions that human beings face and yet are not so old that you have had to answer these questions and live according to your answers. You are, in a way, naturally, albeit accidentally, philosophic. It will be much harder to be genuinely open when you are forty-five years old, have chosen a profession,

married, raised children, and voted in six presidential elections—that is, at a time when admitting you might be wrong would involve calling into question not only your future but a past that defines who you are and that can never be undone. But now, in your college years, you are potentially, wonderfully, with luck naively, open to openness. And openness, you will recall, is the absolute prerequisite for genuine thought. It is one of the sad facts of human life that, this openness seldom lasts. All the more reason, then, not to waste it. Take advantage of it while you have it. It is a treasure you need to protect.

So, for some of you welcome, for others welcome back. You can see how much pleasure it will give me in a few minutes to declare the college officially open.